

A Critical Reflection on W.V.O. Quine's Naturalized Epistemology

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Abstract: W. V. O. Quine is the prominent advocate of naturalized epistemology, collection of philosophical views that employs scientific methods, results and practices to solve epistemological problems. In this paper, I explore whether Quine's argument to replace epistemology by science is convincing. In naturalized epistemology, Quine totally rejects the normative aspect of epistemology; he focuses on the descriptive part of epistemology. Other thinkers such as Kim, Stroud, Almedir, Rorty argues that epistemology without norm is epistemology in name only. Furthermore, all philosophical questions cannot be answered by applying scientific methods, because philosophy's scope is broader than science. Thus, Quine's attempt to scientized philosophy in general and epistemology in particular is unattainable.

Key Words: W. V. O. Quine, Naturalized Epistemology, Replacement Naturalism

1. Introduction

W. V. O. Quine is the prominent proponent of naturalized epistemology. He thought that traditional epistemology has to be replaced by naturalized epistemology. According to Quine, traditional epistemology has two projects: doctrinal project and conceptual project. He held that these two projects of traditional epistemology have failed. Quine argued that the failure of these projects indicates that traditional epistemology is unattainable. So, he concluded, traditional epistemology has to be replaced by naturalized epistemology.

In this paper, I am going to explore whether Quine's argument used to replace traditional epistemology by naturalized epistemology is convincing. Some naturalized epistemologists claim that Quine's argument to replace traditional epistemology by naturalized epistemology is not sound. Before I proceed to specifics, let me briefly summarized Quine's idea of naturalized epistemology.

2. W. V. O. Quine's Naturalized Epistemology/Replacement Naturalism/in Brief

Quine begins his essay by saying that epistemology traditionally is concerned with the foundations of science (Quine, 2008). To demonstrate that science has a sufficient foundation, epistemologists endeavored to derive statements about the world around us from statements about our own sensations. Given that we are certain about our own sensations, if we strictly derive our beliefs about the world from our beliefs about sensations, then we could be certain of the derived truths about the world as well. Therefore, we would have a firm foundation for both everyday knowledge and scientific knowledge (Rysiew, 2017).

Traditional epistemology has two projects: conceptual and doctrinal studies. The conceptual side is the explanation of the notions of body in sensory terms; the doctrinal side is then the establishment of laws of knowledge; uses sensory terms in order to justify our knowledge of truths of nature. The conceptual studies would facilitate the doctrinal ones because the more the term becomes clear the more it become certain; it increases the chance that truths would be obvious (Quine, 2008).

Hume pondered the epistemology of natural knowledge on both sides of the bifurcation, doctrinal and conceptual. He enjoyed limited doctrinal success in grounding some singular statements about bodies by conceptually identifying bodies with types of sense impressions. However, the empiricist doctrinal project failed because of the failure to ground generalizations and singular future tense statements. Or Hume concludes in his treatment of induction that we cannot derive scientific theories from sensory observations (Quine, 2008).

Quine's proposal for naturalizing epistemology grows out of his contention that even Carnap's modest project was inefficient. Meaning even Carnap's work did nothing to advance the doctrinal "quest for certainty" in the face of Humean problems. That means logical empiricists such as Rudolf Carnap tried to reconstruct theoretical vocabulary in sensory terms to justify our belief of scientific theories. Such a project could not be a complete success. For one thing (as Carnap was well aware), our theories cannot be derived logically from observations – the theories include generalizations covering unobserved cases. Nevertheless, Quine claims that, as Carnap thought, the translation of theory into observational terms would be useful. It would allow us to see just how far our theories outstrip/surpass their observational evidence (Quine, 2008).

Quine's second reason why the reconstructive approach must fail is that theoretical statements cannot, in general, be translated into a purely observational vocabulary. To effect such translations, we need to identify the observational conditions of verification (or disconfirmation) for individual theoretical statements. But, as Quine argues in his other most famous essay, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," individual theoretical statements do not have unique conditions of verification (or disconfirmation); individual theoretical statement does not have observational or empirical consequence. Rather, we must test theoretical statements in groups large enough to have observational consequences, and the results confirm or disconfirm the groups as a whole. In other words, Carnap's reduction failed, according to Quine, because scientific theories do not have observational consequences except in the presence of collateral scientific theories (Quine, 2008).

So, Quine's assumption of confirmation holism undermines the possibility of reconstructing theoretical vocabulary in observational terms. Consequently, the reconstructionist approach cannot succeed. Unfortunately, the project of reducing talk of bodies to talk of sensory experience pursued by Rudolf Carnap in *The Logical Structure of the World* (1928/1967), did not come to fruition. Consequently, Quine shows that the doctrinal as well as the conceptual project of old epistemology failed; he concludes that the traditional approach to epistemology totally failed (Quine, 2008).

Nevertheless, Quine's approach is not only deconstructive and he claims:

It may be more useful to say rather that epistemology still goes on, though in a new setting and a clarified status. Epistemology, or something like it, simply falls into place as a chapter of psychology and hence of natural science. It studies a natural phenomenon, viz., a physical human subject. This human subject is accorded a certain experimentally controlled input—certain patterns of irradiation in assorted frequencies, for instance—and in the fullness of time the subject delivers as output a description of the three-dimensional external world and its history. The relation between the meager input and the torrential output is a relation that we are prompted to study for somewhat the same reasons that always prompted epistemology; namely, in order to see how evidence relates to theory, and in what ways one's theory of nature transcends any available evidence (Quine, 2008, p.533)

In the above quotation, Quine wants to say that Epistemology remains a going concern, but transformed. It becomes a part of science; the factual inquiry into the relationship between observation and theory. The key focus for epistemology now becomes how do human beings process observations to produce theories? The key question for Quine becomes how we human beings have managed to arrive at science from such limited information? As a part of natural science, epistemology is free to use the results of the natural sciences to answer its questions (Quine, 2008). And Central to Quine's naturalized epistemology is the claim that epistemology is a branch of psychology. 'The stimulation of his sensory receptors is all the evidence anybody has had to go on, ultimately, in arriving at his picture of the world' (Quine, 2008, p.530) and it is psychology which studies how humans construct their beliefs about the world, given the sensory stimuli they receive. In the same way, the 'new' epistemologist seeks to explain how theoretical output is caused by sensory input; he studies the causal relationship between meager input and torrential output (Quine, 2008). That is to say, epistemology is conducted in a scientific manner and hence naturalized. Quine also notes, however, that there is a sense in which naturalistic epistemology "contains" the rest of science. Our theories and beliefs about the world, which constitute our science, are part of epistemology's subject matter. Because they "contain" one another, epistemology and the rest of science can be mutually constraining (Quine, 2008).

So, according to Quine, there is a noteworthy distinction between old epistemology and naturalized epistemology. There is a difference in relation to the justification of beliefs. The old epistemology was interested in questions about rationality, justification, and knowledge. The central questions concerned is whether an epistemic support relation--a justifying relation--holds between our basic evidence and our beliefs about the world. Analysis of some of the arguments for skepticism reveals that they rely on the view that our evidence supports our beliefs only if our beliefs are deducible from that evidence. Seeing that they are not, many epistemologists are drawn to investigate other accounts of the epistemic support relation, accounts that allow for the possibility that our beliefs about the world are well supported by our sensory evidence, even if they are not strictly derivable from that evidence; asks a normative question. But, a naturalist in epistemology is interested in the route of causation which brings about the transformation from meager input to torrential output; he isn't interested in a justificatory route. He is paying attention to the causal relationship between sensory input and the belief that is formed on the basis of this input. Whether a belief is justified or not depends on whether

the physical stimulus causing the belief is justified. Naturalised epistemology is not in a position to detect this. An unjustified physical stimulus is processed in exactly the same way as a justified one. From within naturalised epistemology, it is irrelevant whether a belief is justified or not. The traditional epistemological question of what justifies a belief is an independent subject matter from the perspective of a proponent of naturalised epistemology (Stroud, 1981).

Thus, if we follow the Quinean recommendation, both traditional epistemologist and naturalized epistemologists study about basic evidence and beliefs about the world. However, they study a different relation. Traditional epistemologists looked to see if there was an epistemic support relation between the data and the beliefs. Naturalized epistemologists look to see the nature of the causal connection between them (Kim, 2008).

Another crucial difference between naturalised and traditional epistemology is that the data for naturalised epistemology are physical stimuli, whereas the data for traditional epistemology are conscious states. In the concept of naturalised epistemology, consciousness seems to be excluded; being a conscious being is not a necessary condition for being a knowing being (Quine 2008).

3. The Objection of Quine's Epistemology Naturalised

Having said these about Quine's idea of naturalized epistemology, let me come to the objection of his argument. Many epistemologists think that Quine's attempt to abandon traditional philosophy altogether in favor of naturalized epistemology is imposable. Among these epistemologists, Jaegwon Kim is the most important one.

Kim argues that the Cartesian project of validating science starting from certain indubitable first principle is not the whole of classical epistemology. So, it would seem at first blush; Quine's argument failed (Kim, 2008).

Kim also argues that if justification drops out of epistemology, knowledge itself drops out of epistemology. Kim claims that knowledge itself is a normative notion. Quine's nonnormative naturalized epistemology has no room for our concept of knowledge. Quines naturalized epistemology, while it may be legitimate scientific inquiry is not a kind of epistemology, and, therefore that the question whether it is a better kind of epistemology cannot arise (Kim, 2008).

The other important argument of Kim is that it is difficult to see how an epistemology that has been purged of normativity, one that lacks an appropriate normative concept of justification or evidence, can have anything to do with the concern of traditional epistemology. And unless naturalized epistemology and classical epistemology share some of their central concerns, it is difficult to see how one could replace the other be a better way of doing the other (Kim, 2008).

Stroud, Almeder and Rorty also criticize Quine's naturalistic approaches to epistemology in that it is unable to successfully deal with norms and questions of justification. Epistemology without norms is epistemology in name only, an endeavor not worth doing (Bradie, 2000).

For me, Quine's interest is to replace philosophy in general and epistemology in particular by science. That means he wants to apply scientific methods to resolve philosophical problems. Here, I want to argue that if we apply scientific methods to philosophy, philosophy ceases to be philosophy. Because, as we know, the scope of philosophy is as wide as the universe. But, this is not the case for science. Science is concerned with empirically observed things, things tested in a laboratory. But, there are some concepts studied by philosophy that cannot be tested in a laboratory. For instance, philosophy is concerned with ultimate reality. And ultimate reality cannot be grasped empirically. So, science cannot grasp the ultimate reality since it is only concerned with the sensible world, unlike philosophy. Philosophy is concerned with the general thing, but science focus on particular things. This indicates that Science cannot answer all questions raised by philosophy. If we follow Quinian proposal, we will be ignorant of the supersensible world. Is it convincing to be ignorant of the super sensible world? To me, it is not really convincing.

Conclusion

In general, Quine's argument for naturalized epistemology is not convincing. This means that it is impossible to replace philosophy by science, because scientific method cannot answer all questions raised by philosophy since the scope of philosophy is wider than science. Thus, Quines attempt to make epistemology scientised is unattainable.

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